

Cinema in the classroom: AUSTRALIA. A good way to learn something about its history and culture

Título: Cinema in the classroom: AUSTRALIA. A good way to learn something about its history and culture. **Target:** 4º DE LA ESO Y BACHILLERATO. **Asignatura:** Inglés. **Autor:** M^a Julia Muñoz Zanón, Licenciada en Traducción e Interpretación, Profesora de Inglés en Educación Secundaria y Bachillerato.

Every time there is an opportunity to watch a film with students in the English classroom, there is also the chance to teach them the culture and the history of Anglo-Saxon countries.

Students are used to the audiovisual world so, they will surely pay more attention in watching these events rather than to read about them on books.

A film is always an entertaining way of learning a foreign language and a good source to introduce students to culture and historic events.

In this case, the film *Australia* will be seen in three-four sessions of 60 minutes approximately. After a short introduction of the film, the teacher will hand students a photocopy with the following questions:

1. Where does the action take place?
2. Who are the main characters? Describe them physically and psychologically
3. What relationship is established among them during the film?
4. Who is your favourite character and why?
5. When does the action take place?
6. What important historical events are seen in the film? What have you learnt about them?
7. Pay attention to the English spoken by the different characters some of them speak in British English other in Australian English. Write some examples of vocabulary, grammar or phonetics you have learnt while watching the film.
8. Why is the song "Over the Rainbow" from the *Wizard of Oz* important in the film?
9. Write a summary of the film
10. Give your opinion about the film. Did you like the film? Why? Why not? What is your favourite scene? Why?
11. What do you know about the director and the stars of the film?
12. Give your opinion about this activity. Do you think it is useful? Why? Why not?

In the following pages it is included the main aspects of the plot, the characters, the language used, the settings and the historical period seen in the film. To sum it up, the document includes the information needed to answer some questions of the photocopy handed over to the students.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE FILM

Australia is an Australian epic historical romantic drama film directed by Baz Luhrmann in 2008 and starred by Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and David Wenham. After *Crocodile Dundee*, it is the second-highest grossing Australia film of all time.

It was produced by Baz Luhrmann, Catherine Knapman and G. Mac Brown. The screenplay was written by Luhrmann, Stuart Beattie, Ronald Harwood and Richard Flanagan.

David Hirschfelder composed the music and included songs like "Over the Rainbow", interpolated musical number including the jazz standards "Begin the Beguine", "Tuxedo Junction", "Sing Sing Sing (With a Swing) and "Brazil". "Waltzing Matilda" is also heard in the end credit.

It lasts 165 minutes and 20th Century Fox distributed the film.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN THE FILM

Lady Sarah Ashley is an English aristocrat with a strong Victorian morality and values who inherits the cattle station Faraway Down after the death of her husband, Maitland Ashley. She is a strong, sometimes a pig-headed woman who does not doubt to work hard to save her husband's station and fights for the adoption of Nullah, an Aboriginal boy. She also falls in love to the rough Drover.

The Drover helps Lady Ashley to move the cattle to Darwin. He is a typical Swag men as he confesses to Lady Ashley; he likes wandering about without any property just living his life. He is friendly with Aboriginals, in fact he was married with an Aboriginal woman, and for this reason he is shunned by many people. He also changes from being a swag men to a family man.

Nullah is a young Aboriginal boy who Lady Ashley finds at Faraway Downs. He witnesses the murder of Lord Ashley and Lady Ashley's cattle being carried to Carney territory by his own father Mr Fletcher. He is a "magic man" as his grandfather has told him. He is a nice, naive boy and the narrator of the story.

Neil Fletcher is a station manager who plans to take Faraway Downs from Lady Sarah Ashley. He is also engaged to "King" Carney's daughter and works for him as well. He is a cruel man who is a constant threaten to Lady Ashley and Nullah, who is his own child.

Lesley "King" Carney is a cattle baron who owns much of the land in Northern Australia and wants to have the monopoly of the cattle in this part of the country. He tries to beat Lady Ashley using different illegal strategies but in the end he surrenders and accepts Lady Ashley's triumph. He is competitive and ambitious but he recognises Lady Ashley's value and work.

Kipling Flynn is the alcoholic accountant who also participates in the plot against Lord Ashley to divert the cattle to Carney's territory but he finally changes and participates in the driving of the cows to Darwin. He realises that Nullah knows who is the murderer of Lord Ashley.

King George, the mysterious magic man, is Nullah's grandfather and suspected of having murdered Lord Ashley. He has an important rôle during the film because he guides the group in the Never Never Desert and he saves his grandson at the end of the film when Fletcher tries to kill him.

Magarri, the brother-in-law of Drover. He is his partner and his best friend. Together with Drover and other two people, he saves the children in the Mission Island although he sacrifices himself.

There are more characters but they play a secondary role. We can comment their importance or what they represent in the film, like the relationship of the different races for example Chinese, Russian and Aboriginal.

THE HISTORICAL PERIOD

The film is set in the years before the Second World War and the beginning of it with the attack of some Japanese planes on Darwin.

At the beginning of the film, there is a map illustrating the threaten of German Nazi over Europe and one of the main topics of the film is the race for selling the cows to the Army. The thrilling end of the film also shows how the Japanese arrived to the Mission Island searching for survivals to kill them, the attack on Darwin and the evacuation of citizens to other parts of the country.

Other historical events present in the film are the First World War as the Drover mentions he had fought in it and the Stolen Generation policy that took place in Australia from 1909 to 1969. Nullah suffers the Australian policy of separate half-calf people from their aboriginal families and he is taken together with other children to a missionary island to be Europeanised.

We will emphasize this point as many students may be familiarised with Second World War but they will probably ignore the Stolen Generations problem.

It will be a good idea for the later debate to ask students to search more information about the topic of the Stolen Generation as it was an important historical fact in Australia.

AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE AND FAUNA

Australian territory is divided into six states: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (TAS), Victoria (VIC) and Western Australia (WA). Australia also has two major territories: The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the Northern Territory (NT).

As we have mentioned before, this film is a good opportunity to enjoy the magnificent landscapes of the Northern Territory of Australia and the Outback.

The main characteristics of the Northern Territory is Uluru and Kata Tjuta, two spectacular natural rock formations which are sacred to the local Aboriginal people and major tourist attractions. Although in the film they are not shown, the landscape is very similar for example it is mention *The Never Never Desert* in the Outback of Australia. The characters have to cross it to deliver the cattle to the army at Darwin. They are thought to be dead as it is shown in a Newspaper in the film but the sergeant Callahan tells Carney that army planes have seen them alive.

The other important feature is the wetlands and native wildlife together with an extensive series of river systems like the Liverpool River delta or Alligator Rivers. It appears in the film while the dry season arrives and at the beginning of the film when Nullah is being taught to fish.

The Northern Territory climate is characterised by two seasons, the wet season from October to April and the dry season from May to September. Its climate is also part of the film. At the beginning of the film, it is the

time of the dry season, it is also a reflection of the situation of the characters and Faraway Downs at the limit of dying, of falling. But when the wet season arrives, love explodes, life emerges and a new place seems to come out from its ashes.

An important scene in the film is precisely when Lady Ashley and Drover leave the ball, it starts to rain and their relationship begins. At the same time, the character of Neil Fletcher is left alone in the middle of the rain.

As regards to the Australian fauna, the students can observe the most representative Australian animals: kangaroos and crocodiles. There is a good scene that shows the different view of Lady Ashley and the Australian characters. When she sees a group of red kangaroos for the first time, she is absolutely excited with the sight of these fantastic animals. While for the Aboriginals the kangaroo is food and Goolaj shoots one to eat it, despite the horror of Lady Ashley.

The other representative Australian animal in the film is the crocodile who attacks King Carney changing the plot of the film again.

THE LANGUAGE

The language spoken in the film by the characters is also a good sample of the dialects of English. Lady Ashley speaks a high class RP English. The Drover speaks Australian English. Nullah and the rest of the Aboriginals speak Australian Aboriginal English.

Students are probably get used to Lady Ashley accent as she speaks RP English. The good point in this film is the view the students can get in hearing other varieties of English. Some of the main features of Australian English will be basically commented because otherwise there will be another topic for an article.

The Australian English is a major variety of the language with a distinctive accent and lexicon and differs slightly from other varieties of English in grammar and spelling. In the film, there is the example of the expression: **old poor fellow** which appears on the bottles of whisky. Australian English is also characterised by shorten words.

Other example of variety of English in the film is the Australian Aboriginal English. It is made up of a range of forms which developed differently in different parts of Australia, and are said to vary along a continuum, from forms close to Standard Australian English to more non-standard forms. There are distinctive features of accent, grammar, words and meanings, as well as language use. Pay attention to how Nullah always refers to Lady Ashley as Miss Boss.

“OVER THE RAINBOW” SONG AND THE RAINBOW SNAKE

The song “Over The Rainbow” from *The Wizard of Oz* also plays a symbolic role in the film. In the Aboriginal culture, there is a rainbow snake which is the origin of the world. The song appears in different moments of the film: when Nullah loses his mother and Lady Ashley comforts him by singing the song. Nullah tells her that King George is his grandfather, and that like the Wizard, he is a “magic man” too. We have to mention to students that the world Oz is an homophone of Aus, the way Australian are also nickname.

Later, the accountant teaches Nullah how to play the song with the harmonica. Then in Darwin, Nullah disguised like a true Aboriginal watches *The Wizard of Oz*. At the end of the film, when Lady Ashley is almost leaving the city, she hears the song and the family is reunited again.

OTHER ABORIGINAL CULTURAL ASPECTS

In the film, it is also important the “walkabout” that Nullah has to do with King George and which provokes a crisis between Lady Ashley and the Drover as she does not want Nullah to leave her but the Drover respects the costumes of the Aboriginal and he is in favour of Nullah's departure.

The walkabout refers to a rite of passage during which male Australian Aborigines would undergo a journey during adolescence and live in the wilderness for a period as long as six months.

In the film *Australia*, there are also references to the magical songs and rites made by Aborigines like the songs sung by Nullah to stop the rush or the prohibition of not mentioning the name of a deceased person.

RACISM

The film is an excellent opportunity to deal with transversal values such as the respect to others. Here, we can see the attitude of white people to Aboriginal people and half Aboriginal. The relationship between the different races and classes. Ivan the owner of the bar, who is also an immigrant, does not allow black people to enter and even women are separated from men in his bar.

The Aboriginal people are more respectful towards half-Aboriginal children than white people. Lady Ashley at the beginning is a little bit reluctant to the relationship of Aboriginal with man as it is seen when the Drover greets an Aboriginal girl, but she finds a good help and support in the Aboriginal women in the cattle station, considering them as part of her family.

CONCLUSION

After the vision of the film, the students answers the questions and it is also the perfect moment to debate the different topics that are seen in the film like racism, Aboriginal Australian culture, the role of the woman...Finally, it is time to make an evaluation of the activity. Whether they have liked the film or not and their opinions about the activities.

To sum up, the film *Australia* is not only a routine breaker activity but it is also a good way to introduce students to other countries, languages and stories. ●

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